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**Agitation and propaganda in *people's education*
during the Rákosi-era**

Propositions

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With the approval of the western Great Powers after 1945 the Soviet Union gained a remarkably larger ground in Central-Eastern-Europe than ever before. On one hand it meant the direct annexation of particular areas, and on the another hand the USSR grounded its hegemonic ambitions by creating vassal states that “protected” its western boundaries.

Hungary was amongst these satellite sates. By 1948-1949 the one-party system was de facto developed and practically authority was concentrated in the hands of few communist leaders while the government in power was merely a marionette. It is important to emphasise that these people basically were not those who went underground in Hungary during the Horthy-regime, but from the circle of the so-called moscowits: Mátyás Rákosi, Mihály Farkas, Ernő Gerő, Imre Nagy, etc. They completely identified themselves with the communist ideas during their emigration in Moscow between the two World Wars. They arrived back to the country in 1945 as a sort of governors, the executors of Moscow’s central instructions and they constantly reconciled their decisions with the Russian capital. As in the entire “*eastern block*”, that itself guarantied the loyalty towards the unsophisticated ideology and undivided power – especially after the liquidation of the parliamentary democracy. In this regard Hungary did not differ from the other countries that after 1945 belonged to the Soviet sphere of interest.

As every totalitarian ideology the bolshevism wanted to rule all aspects of life completely. It fortified its relentless exercise of

power with sublime ideology of which the superiority of the Soviet (-type) lifestyle, thinking, world-view and science compared to any other social structure was an important element. According to that, in the spirit of the totalitarian conception the culture that covered all aspects of public- and some of the private life, could not been left out. Moreover it got an important role.

The scientific propaganda was also important in the Soviet Union, which was especially true until the death of Stalin. There were propagandas for such scientific (or pseudo-scientific) oeuvres like Michurin's or Lysenko's. However, science was not able to address broad masses, that is why it was necessary to find an other medium which was capable of ideologically manipulate the largest possible target groups. That was culture and the device was cultural propaganda.

The system was built with the specific characteristics of totalitarian regimes: a foreign element was enclosed between the mediation of culture and science – the ideology. By that the true objective of the culture was firmly decreased: the primary mission was not to increase the cultural level, the transmission of knowledge and amusement but to have a mediation role serving the Soviet ideology.

That was the practise in the USSR and in the “vassal” states and so that kind of mediation of culture shows a single image. The leaders, returned from Moscow, fully adopted the Soviet propaganda and they endeavoured to centralize all fields of culture. That manifested in the erection of the Hungarian Art Counsel; in the

design of the new, Soviet style coat of arms; the celebrations of the Centenary and the Revolution and Independence War of 1948-1949.

Plenty Soviet propaganda material arrived to Hungary through the Hungarian-Soviet Cultural Society and later the Hungarian-Soviet Society. However, the moscowit leaders were competing with each other in order to gain the favour of the Soviet leadership. They made efforts with maximal servilism to prove to Moscow that they trusted country to the right hand. The planned popularisation of the Soviet culture in Hungary started in 1949 by Soviet cultural days during which Soviet analysts and consultants visited science- and artistic institutions.

During the '50-ies culture functioned as the transmission channel of the central ideology. It played a significant role in the maintenance of the of the Soviet-type states beside the ideological terror and the bureaucratic machinery. The objective of this dissertation is to present how this reflected in the practices of the cultural politics, more precisely in the field of so-called people's education.

In the glossary of the '50-ies "people's education" included all of the institutions in connection with civilization. As Hungary became a people's republic and in theory all power was placed in the working people's hand so became the culture in the possession of the people – and the civilization became people's education. The Ministry of Peolpe's Education that was formed in 1949 had the authority of organising and monitoring the affairs of the press, radio,

literature, music, fine arts, theatres, films, libraries and cultural centres.

The PH.D thesis shows the role that the arts centres movie theatres and libraries (as considered of fields of people's education) played in propaganda and agitation during the '50-ies. The topic selection focused on these three areas while these transmitted the culture – and by means the communist ideology – to smaller settlements. Many of these kind of cultural institutions were built in the beginning of the '50-ies and they became instruments of partly amusement and partly (re)education.

Accordingly the Hungarian leaders during the Rákosi-era destined a significant role to the civilization and its institutions since they existed as the most important mediation channels of the Stalinist ideology. Within the frame of this pursuit for the “appropriate” ideological refinement and conviction of board masses the national network of cultural centres, cinemas and libraries was built. We must note though, that this kind of “active” cultural politics – regardless the ideology itself – is a characteristic that all modern dictatorial state share. (Moreover, it is a feature of the democratic countries as well.) The objectives and structures of the cultural politics of the Rákosi-era were not different from other dictatorships, however, the national characteristics (eg the outlining of the Hungarian history) were dominant in its content – though not only the frames but the contents were also influenced by the Soviet model.

The materials of the study group, organised presentations and lecture series held in the cultural centres transmitted almost exclusively the values of the central ideology.

Besides, during this period, like in every totalitarian system particular celebrations got an extremely important role. The choosing (eg 7th November) and the re-naming (“pine feast”) of celebrations were integral parts of the propaganda. The historical holidays were merely – as a parallel – occasion for putting stress on the actual political rhetoric (eg 15th March) while others were open propagations for the existing system (eg 7th November, the birthday of Rákosi). Characteristically the central culture control was efficient in this field as well: from the national events to the festive programmes of small villages the government tended to regulate, confine and base them on strict ideological guidelines. The celebrations had basically one role: the promotion of the existing social order.

The cultural competitions that were organised during the '50-ies were obviously the instruments of the political propaganda. By organising them not only the artistic standards were supposed to be elevated but the folk traditions were to be cared for too, however, meanwhile the direct aim was to extend the political ideology to that area. What is more: the original objective decreased to be a mere instrument, while it must be outlined again that it independently carried the role of mediation of culture.

According to the era's glossary the mostly within the frames of the cultural centres operating culture-agitation brigades were

important parts of the people's education at the given time and location. The leading politicians gave an actually big role in the political agitation and propaganda of these groups and expected serious results of their operation. It is a special characteristic of their vivid activity that these brigades were listed to the cultural field, however, it is beyond doubt that their pursuit was considerably far from actual artistic expressions. This genre was merely a channel for one-sided transmission of the communist ideology with which people were addressed directly by the power through short, easily understandable and cardinal messages. This must be emphasised because it is era-marker itself: only a dictatorship can produce such "artistic" activity in a similar disguise. That was the genre that had no positive increments, which had no actual cultural value, the genre where the "used materials" were directly "produced" for its function. Namely it is not true here that cultural values were used consequently and it transmitted nothing worthwhile.

Before – and during – the World War II people liked going to movie theatres and for plenty of them only that kind of amusement was available. Movies as definitely devices of entertainment transformed during the Rákosi-era. Though it was typical during the previous years as well that the state used motion picture for propaganda aims, to transmit and spare the ideas and thinking which was considered to be beatific, the extent of the absolutism, which emerged at the late '40-ies, had never been seen before. Movie theatres and films became the part of the propaganda-machinery, so as any other cultural factors.

Besides the cultural centres and cinemas, the libraries played the same role in the '50-ies. They might only have the books that were approved by the authorities and they had to take their shares, similarly to the other cultural institutions, from propaganda and actual agitation tasks – eg elections or even agitations against “cleric reaction”.

The propaganda and agitation was present in all areas of the culture of the '50-ies, however, its effect is questionable.

The forcefully spread culture showed some kind of successfulness because the cultural institutions (that mushroomed during the period) and the events organised by them had many visitors, especially in the rural country where they were attractive entertainment/cultural facilities. However, the number of the audience and part-takers had decreased through the years because of the over and over repeated stereotyped mottos. There was a change in the history of the cultural institutions after the turn at June 1953: instead of the improvement of quantitative factors, the qualitative conditions came into view, which meant although they did not (could not) break away from politics, the cultural institutions got nearer to their original objectives. Giving guidelines instead of strict central instructions and expectations, along with giving more space to local initiatives played a significant role in that process. The creation and sustention of a pleasant atmosphere in the people's education became a new object – and meanwhile the transmitting channels of the culture remained instruments of the propaganda. The aggressive and direct agitation was changed to a more “casual” and intimate

propaganda. Even the name of the cultural agitation was changed to “artistic agitation.” Therefore it can be stated that after 1953 the propaganda was still considered important but instead of the rigid patterns they rather chose persuasion with respect to the local folk traditions.

The pursuit for restructuring and sovietizing of the culture by rough and violent methods prevailed for only a few years at the beginning of the '50-ies. That was merely a grotesque experiment that changed nothing on the Hungarian elite- and mass culture, for example the teaching of Russian language became unsuccessful (later as well).

As the conclusion of the dissertation we can state that as the communists emerged to power they started to change the areas of civilization from theoretical and practical aspects as well. The state that was drifting towards dictatorship “naturally” could not leave this highly important area, by which broad masses could be reached, untouched. The cultural centres, cinemas and libraries, that played an important role in the cultural life of the communities, became the instruments of wide distribution of the Soviet ideology. However, the ideologically strictly limited and top-down cultural policy and strained, merely quantitative increases demanding cultural politics resulted in distorted development – if indeed it could be called development.

Considering bibliography and sources

The PH.D thesis was written primary based on sources of Archives, especially on the records of the National Archives of Hungary, most of which are the general papers and protocols on collage meetings of the Ministry of People's Education. The other important group of sources were the papers of the Hungarian Workers' Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja – MDP). The digitalized materials of the Political Committee, Secretariat and Organizing Committee are available at www.digitarchive.hu. In terms of the research it was essential to process the materials of the Party's Agitation and Propaganda Department (Agiprop Department). In accordance with the purpose thesis and complementing the national papers on people's education I worked up the papers of The Department of Adult Education of The Executive Board of The Council of County Pest which are in the care of the Pest County Archives. That was important because many of the Ministry's measures and instructions were available only among the county's materials.

The cultural press, especially the professional press on people's education, such as *Művelt Nép*, *Népművelési Híradó* and *Népművelés* were important sources as well. The manuscripts of the archives of the Hungarian Institute for Culture and Arts meant a great help with the writing the dissertation.

Knowing this period the resources, of course, had to be handled with critics – the statements and data had to be subjected to source criticism. That applies for the printed literature as well.

Up till now there was no comprehensive bibliographic work on the cultural propaganda and agitation activity of the '50-ies. Only the in essays of the experts of people's education can we found summaries of the characteristics of the mass-cultural activities of the period. However, *The Halls of Culture* the three volume work of József Kovalcsik is essential to the cognition of the history of arts centres]. In the first volume the author gives an international outlook. In the second volume he presents the history of these institutions until 1945 and the third volume deals with the period between the World War II and the '70-ies.

The works of Gábor Szilágyi are extremely important basic-sources considering the history of the Hungarian films and cinemas. In *Baptism of Fire* he wrote the history of the Hungarian movies between 1945 and 1953. As a sequel the *Sign of life* published in 1994 deals with the Hungarian film-history between 1954 and 1956. Beside these books the *Feature films 1945-1962*, which was published by the Hungarian National Film Archive, must be noted. This multimedia issue presents the basic information on the films of the period and we can find essays and bibliography on film-history as well.

The chapter on libraries was based on mostly sources from archives and the printed materials of the period. From the bibliography we must outline two summaries on the library-history: *Handbook of Libraries* (Vol. IV.) and *The History of Hungarian Libraries*.